

A BIWEEKLY WEBZINE ABOUT BALANCING WORK AND LIFE

# JUGGLEZINE

**Family Ties: You, Your Spouse, Your Kids,  
and Your Parents - All on the Same Block. How  
Close is Too Close?**

by David Whitemyer  
Published 11.24.00



## Family Ties

You, your spouse, your kids, and your parents—all on the same block. How close is too close?

BY DAVID WHITEMYER

On Thanksgiving morning, as we're on our way to my in-law's house, I offer a wry commentary on how much I hate traveling on the holidays.

Halfway there, I realize that we forgot the pumpkin pie. My two-year-old son warns, "Nana Papa pie for dinner," suggesting that I turn back. I do. My grumbling only lasts a minute, though, as we march through our basement and climb the back stairs to our destination. We've finally arrived—Grandma's kitchen. Elapsed time: 180 seconds.

A few years ago when my wife's parents invited us to rent their ground floor apartment, we were afraid. Despite the obvious financial incentives, our concerns focused on the potential loss of independence. By ourselves, away from family, we had built a community of close friends and familiar services. Though not very far by modern standards, the 14 miles and 3 million people between us made it distant enough to warrant visits on birthdays and holidays only. We had our own lives.

Raised to believe that personal responsibility defined our maturity, Bethany and I were fearful of the stigmatism that might come from "movin' back in with Mom and Dad." There is a preconception that adult children rarely get along with their parents, and that there is an even more hostile relationship between in-laws. What if people called us names? "Slackers!"

The decision to move was difficult, but it turned out to be one of the best we ever made. And now, with a toddler, things are even better.

### **And baby makes . . . five**

Anyone with half a child and two incomes is familiar with juggling life. For example: day care won't allow your sniffing child back into the classroom until he's been fever-free for 24 hours.

You and your spouse have mandatory office meetings. Unlike everyone else, however, we have an ace up our sleeve—Grandma and Grandpa.

It's not only a good deal for us and our respective employers, it's a good deal for our son. A lot of research has been done regarding the importance of the grandparent/grandchild relationship. A study by the U.S. Census Bureau suggests that children growing up with a close grandparent exhibit strong feelings of loyalty and maturity when they become parents. The benefits to the child are self-evident.

What is not so clear, and what hasn't been studied much, is the impact this relationship has on my life—the adult child.

It can be stressful, although it isn't as often as you might think. When we first moved in, no one was certain of the expectations. They hadn't been discussed. Were we supposed to have dinner together every Sunday? (No, they have a busy life, too.) If I bumped into my father-in-law out front, was I obligated to make small talk? (No, not any more than with our other neighbors.)

Even now, questions come up. We are currently undergoing kitchen remodeling. Who makes the decisions? Who pays for what? (The jury is still out). It's not our house, but we are family. This is not the typical landlord/tenant relationship.

### **A boon, not burden**

In the big picture, however, the occasional awkwardness doesn't stand out. I have become an advocate of living near one's extended family. Many of today's baby boomer grandparents are young and active. They can provide a much-needed network of parenting and work support, babysitting, lending a car, and providing periodic meals. (Or in my own case, they drive to the emergency room after late night tablesaw accidents.)

In a word, they have made our life easier.

In the book *The Nanas and the Papas*, by Kathryn and Allan Zullo, Dr. Arthur Kornhaber says, "When grandparents are involved with grandchildren, it really helps marriages." Dr.

Kornhaber, Founder of the [Foundation for Grandparenting](#), continues, "It takes a lot of the pressure off because the parents may be able to go off alone." Romance aside, it's also helpful for performing simple tasks like vacuuming or going grocery shopping.

But it's not just about babysitting. Lots of grandparents provide care for their grandchildren—about 1.6 million full-timers according to the [Census Bureau](#). The real joy of living near my in-laws is . . . well . . . the joy. We have fun together. All five of us have fun.

### **"Better you than me"**

With a dearth of information on this topic, I performed an unscientific poll of my own. Strolling from cubicle to cubicle, I asked co-workers about living near parents—what they would like about it, and what they would dislike. What I really wanted to ask was, "So, am I crazy or what?"

Many responses included words such as "meddling," and "privacy." Others admitted that it might be nice having parents around for free babysitting or a well-cooked meal. For the most part, people seemed to agree with Jerry Seinfeld, who once stated, "There is no such thing as fun for the entire family." Good for grandchildren, yes! But few of my co-workers saw any benefit for themselves. It's worth mentioning, however, that I work with a number of young unmarried professionals who still place a high value on separation from home.

My wife, on the other hand, works with a lot of new parents. In a similar unscientific conversational poll, most of her colleagues called us lucky. Maybe we're not crazy after all.

The spirit of risk and freedom in America encourages grown children to move far away, become self-sufficient, and make a place in the world. Many of us rate our independence by how many miles we can stretch between family. However, in a twist of stereotypes, Bethany and I have found even more freedom by moving in the opposite direction—back towards Mom and Dad, 180 seconds away.

Parenting is easier. Work is easier. Life is simpler. □

[DAVID WHITEMYER](#) lives and juggles in Boston. His wife's parents proofread this article over breakfast while

David mowed their lawn.